

ABOUT MUSIC

– By Mariss McTucker

Steve Betz: *Kaleidoscope*
Recorded, mixed, and mastered
by Dan Nichols at Soul Tree
Recording Studio, Helena, MT;
produced by Dan Nichols and
Steve Betz, 2013.

Helena guitarist/songwriter Steve Betz has cut a new CD featuring his trademark “feel-good Americana with Christian threads.” All the songs are his, save Ray Golden’s “Have You.”

Betz’s fine cast of music-makers includes co-producer Dan Nichols on percussion, Mike Killeen on acoustic and electric guitars and background vocals, and Terry O’Hare on bass electric and acoustic guitars. There’s also a bunch of guest pickers and a female chorus that sings some answering “hallelujahs” to Betz’s lead on “Letting Go.”

“Dance with Me” wafts through the air like a tropical breeze; it’s got a solid Nichols drum track that should get those pinkies wigglin’. “Safe in the Arms” is a waltz with a Sixties nuance; it’s a devout duet with Kaitlynn Skoog that seeks solace from the Lord. In fact, Betz shows unabashed reverence for the deity in just about every composition, and is good at combining the divine and temporal in music you can dance to.

“The Bright Side” is a bluesy rock song, and “I Know” is another prayerful spoonful with a squiggly guitar riff on the intro. Betz pleads and growls as he sings, “I’m on a sunken ship in Nowhere Bay,” knowing his Lord will answer.

A slow jitterbugger, “Dancin’ School,” closes out the album. It’s a humorous, gentle tune about someone learning how to hoof it. Our clumsy protagonist buys some shoes that are “special order, no delay, bright and shiny, they fit O.K. It’s pretty cool, they both point the same way!” This one ought to do the trick if you’re still sitting down. Visit www.stevebetz.com.

20 Grand: *Don’t Hoard the Funk*

Recorded, mixed and mastered by
Brett Allen at SnowGhost Music,
Whitefish, MT; produced by 20
Grand, 2014.

These first-rate Whitefish musicians recently released a debut album, thanks to a successful Kickstarter campaign.

Founder and guitarist Jamie Simpson, who wrote most of the material, hails from New Orleans and brings the group its southern funk sensibility. Other members are Vincent Rannazzisi, drums; Rebecca Nelson, tenor sax; Eric Gates, baritone sax; Nick Simko, trumpet; and Toby Ferguson, percussion. Hip-hop performer Eric Kanter belts out rap on many tunes, and Dan Brua plays bass on the CD but has since left the band. They all met through different bands and projects over the years, and share ample songwriting credits.

Eric Gates’s “Dump Truck” spotlights bluesy wah-wah guitar and the twitching dissonance of burping horns, giving way to a burbling baritone sax riff. Slurred notes on the trumpet chime in, the guitar lays down oodles of flat notes, the tenor sax dishes up smooth funk, and before you know it, you’re out on the dance floor.

“Camel Toe” has wicked off-kilter horn lines over a steady beat. Whiffs of stutter-step guitar co-mingle with jazzy blips and blats and slurred trumpet notes a la Dizzy Gillespie, creating a well-coordinated whole.

Atlanta Rhythm Section nuances populate “Randall Ashdown,” with its chuggin’ beat and a horn motif that sounds like a belly laugh. That is so cool!

Sax-player Nelson’s “Black Marshmellow” has a lush palm-tree feel, wherein a quiet rim tap, the sish of a hi-hat, and slithering guitar licks establish the mood. The arrangement builds on the interplay of warbly, honkin’ saxes and wild sci-fi chords, then the players take turns struttin’ their stuff while Kanter raps. Fun!

The band live-tracked and recorded the album in two days in analog format. The production is crisp and clean, and all the pieces come together in exuberant, controlled chaos. You can tell this gang enjoys making the instruments talk. As Kanter chants in “Bushwick”: “We came here to rock the jam, everybody throw your hands.” And we do! Visit the band at www.20grand.com.

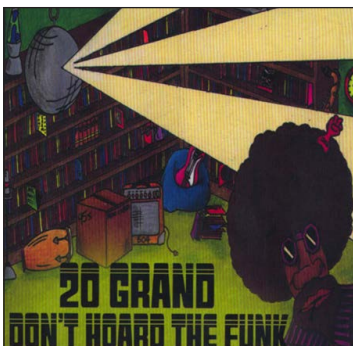
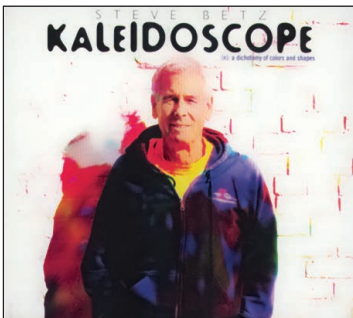
Two Bit Franks

Recorded, mixed, and mastered by Fred
Baker at Electric Peak Recording,
Gardiner, MT; additional recording
by Tom Murphy at Mandotom Studio in
Bozeman, produced by John
Lowell, 2013.

This Gallatin Valley supergroup, John Lowell’s latest gang of tuneslayers, has unleashed an eponymous EP of dazzling bluegrass musicianship. Lead vocalist and guitarist Lowell is surrounded by equally talented pickers Jeff Shouse, banjo; Tom Murphy, mandolin and vocals; Kevin Fabozzi, mandocello, mandolin and vocals; and Russell Smith, bass and vocals.

Lowell’s “Wild Jack” comes first. His trademark seamless guitar licks complement the tale of an old Montana cowboy’s escapades. The song is well stocked with morsels of melody lines from each lead instrument, and vocal woos and woo-ahs on the chorus. It’s kind of a modernized Sons of the Pioneers touch. Gotta love it!

Murphy starts his own twin-mandolin composition, “Crow Wing,” alongside Fabozzi. Bounding along, lilting and fluttering with fluid lead lines from all, the instrumental is traditional yet jazzy. It retains its structure, never devolving into “mellow-lite” riffing or head-banger jamming that seems to populate so much progressive bluegrass these days. Call me old-fashioned, but I find that refreshing.



His other contribution, “Wake Up Call,” cascades right into twin mandolins before launching into stretched-out breaks from others. Delightful!

Smith sings his own “It Won’t Change My Mind”; it’s got more great harmonies and a nifty chord change. Fabozzi sings the traditional song, “Cannonball Blues” – listen to those soulful mandocello licks, played left-handed even, bawdy yet so smooth. The frets on that thing are huge and wide, but Fabozzi tiptoes up and down them easily. It’s great to hear the little-known instrument played well.

“Mamma Don’t Like It” is Lowell’s comic story of a hen-pecked moonshine runner who gets in trouble with the law at times, much to the dismay of his wife. Everybody takes a spin after each verse, playing bluesy breaks. “It don’t matter ’bout my alibi, she’s got a pan in her fist and blood in her eye,” Lowell sings in his skilled baritone. And how often do you hear the jail referred to as the “calaboose”?

His “A World Far Beyond” is a moving spiritual that hearkens to folklore themes of old, featuring four-part part harmony that will give you goose bumps.

Sterling production wraps up the whole package. If you’re fortunate to see these guys in person, you won’t soon forget them. Visit the artists at www.twobitfranks.com.

Daniel and the Blonde

Engineered by Jimmy Kujala and
Charlie Brandine at M Hanging
K Music Ranch, Red Lodge, MT;
produced by D. D. Hallock and
Jimmy Kujala, 2013.

Daniel and the Blonde, Whitefish’s Daniel Hallock and Rumeysa Venus, have a self-titled compilation out with Hallock-written originals that cross folk, bluegrass and country boundaries.

Hallock plays guitars, harmonica, and whistle, while Venus provides percussion, washboard and bass drum. The production is spare and spotless.

The married couple is mainly accompanied by Charlo’s own Brenna Hyvonen on piano and engineer Kujala on bass; other guests add to a few tracks. Josh Burlison co-wrote “When the War Is Over.”

“Dylan Fan” has lyrics that borrow from Bob Dylan song titles; Hallock adds harmonica riffs as well. He credits Ramblin’ Jack Elliot and Woody Guthrie as influences, evident here. The pair sings in unison on the refrain in their songs rather than splitting into harmony parts, seemingly a trademark; Venus’s high, clear soprano provides contrast to Hallock’s rich baritone.

Venus, who as a youngster listened to lots of music with her Turkish mother and aunts, didn’t sing publicly until she met Hallock a few years back. She sings first on “Something’s Gotta Give,” a loping, country-infused ballad. Her voice is well suited to the genre; it’s earthy, without all the synthetic mannerisms Nashville wannabes force on our ears. “The best way to put the past behind you is to get out on the road and give it hell,” she sings, while Hyvonen plays dreamy, gentle piano.

“I Feel Like Drinkin’” is a quiet waltz; Hallock shows a weariness in his voice that belies his young age. And there’s a toe tapper about politics, “Voting with Dollars.”

“Honky Tonk Queen” boasts this lyric: “She’s still got the clothes and they still fit her, but her skin is blue and her hair is withered.” There’s a visual for you. Visit the pair at www.danielandtheblonde.com.

The Bus Driver Tour:

Halfway Between

Recorded and produced by Noel
Webster at a studio in Huntsville,
AL, 2014.

The trio of Danny Freund, Ian Thomas, and Paul Lee Kupfer that calls both Livingston and Knoxville home, has just put out a follow-up album to last year’s self-titled release. Conceived as a project to banish overproduction and the shortcomings of digital recording, it utilizes the old-style analog sound to deliver what they call “raw expression and the gleam of imperfection.”

Working with award-winning producer Noel Webster, prior owner of the famed Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, the men crafted a mostly live recording in four days between dates on their spring tour. The result is vintage and authentic.

As is their custom, they composed all the songs, and each sings on his own while trading around guitars, drums and bass. The fellas have distinctive voices, lending texture to the material. The trio is accompanied on the album by Cornelia Overton on fiddle and vocals, and Josh Oliver on guitars, organ, and vocals.

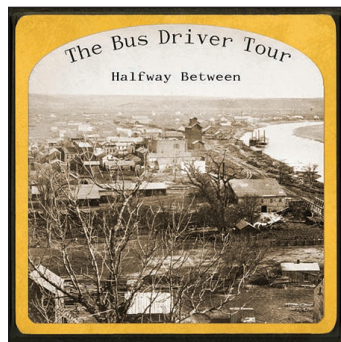
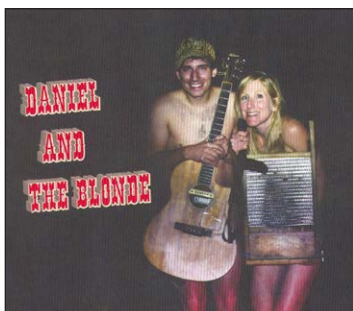
A chunky Cajun beat fires up the first tune, Thomas’s “Before the Sun Goes Down.” It’s got a shoulder-shakin’ rhythm and nifty guitar and fiddle breaks, with a bluesy mouthful of Thomas harmonica.

Freund’s “Rodeo” sports a gentle country beat with fluid guitar accompaniment. There’s interesting timing on the bridge, and the guys sing in unison a bit.

Kupfer’s “Aparcero” is a sweet-tempered ballad about family, expressive and sad with silky fiddle; and his “Where the Wind Goes” really displays that concise analog sound. Spooky with a rock-steady beat highlighting Thomas’s consummate drum work, it’s got lots of reverb and eerie high ooh-oohs from Overton. Tom-tom, hi-hat, crisp guitar strum, that rich thunk of bass, you gotta love analog!

“Atonement can’t forgive us on its own,” go the lyrics. “The chains will always battle if you don’t fully cut them, but they will never fall off on their own.” I swear there’s a nuance of America’s highway sound, except these guys have way more soul.

There’s blues, shuffles, more Cajun, a folky ballad. Lots of ground covered to get you dancin’. Try to catch The Bus Driver Tour around the state in August. Joining them on the road is young Tennessee fiddle player Frank Bronson. Visit the artists at www.thebusdrivertour.com.



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**State of
the Arts
welcomes CDs**

State of the Arts welcomes CD submissions by Montana musicians for inclusion in the About Music section. The recordings must be professional, commercially available, full-length CDs, with cover art and liner notes. Brief biographical information on band members would be helpful to the writer.

Please send submissions to either the Montana Arts Council, PO Box 202201, Helena, MT, 59620; or *Lively Times*, 33651 Eagle Pass Trl., Charlo, MT 59824.